

Equality and Diversity Strategy 2021-2024

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Version 1



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Foreword

**EDI is critically important to us
and our ambitious plans will
drive us forward**

We're publishing this strategy at a time when equality, diversity and inclusion couldn't be more relevant. Recent events have brought into very sharp focus just how much more work we must do to create an equal and fair society.

The housing sector plays a very important part in achieving that goal. At Sovereign our ambition has always been to provide good quality, affordable homes and services. In doing so, we've never forgotten that we are also a social business.

We're firmly committed to our fundamental purpose of providing homes and meeting housing needs. As part of that we're aware of our huge responsibility to ensure that individual housing needs are not impacted by skin colour or disability just as they should not be limited by socio-economic factors.

We also firmly believe that diversity enriches our individual and collective experience as well as our performance and achievement. We know that if we really want to achieve our goals then we must do everything we can to create environments where differences are celebrated, where all of our people feel supported and where everyone is valued and respected.

Equality, diversity and inclusion is a golden thread the runs through our corporate ambitions and our values. This strategy sets out our diversity, equality and inclusion ambitions for the next three years as well as how we will embed the agenda into our culture so that it becomes the responsibility of everyone at Sovereign to achieve.

We know that we have more to do and that our actions must be relevant to our times and to meet peoples' individual needs. This strategy marks the start of our journey towards excellence. It sets out our new approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, an approach which we feel will help us to take real action to meet the challenges we face as an organisation. Our updated strategy is not only our statement on the importance we place on equality, diversity and inclusion but a step change in the way that we will approach and deliver on our commitments and we are proud to share it with you.

Our vision

We want to be a leader
in equality, diversity
and inclusion

To deliver our vision to be the leading landlord across the South of England, providing good quality, affordable homes and services within successful, sustainable communities, we know we must fully embrace equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Our ambition is to be a leader in diversity and inclusion, to build a diverse workforce that reflects our communities, to be recognised as a fair and inclusive employer and landlord and to be a force for change in EDI issues in the sector and beyond.

Why equality, diversity and inclusion matter?

Because it's the right thing to do for our people, our customers, our business and our society.

Because bringing together people with a diversity of perspectives will lead to a better understanding of our employee and customer needs and ultimately better business performance.

Because creating environments where all our employees and customers are valued and respected and can be their true selves will start to change our corner of the world and beyond.



A new approach

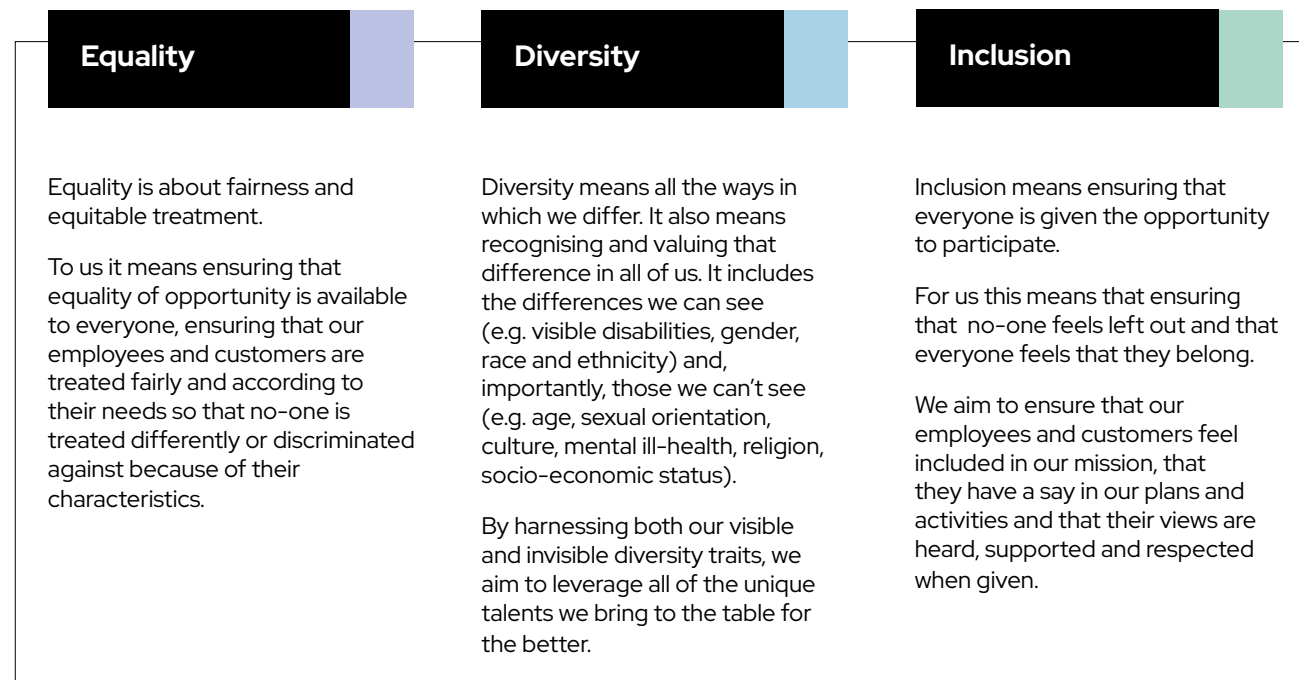


We've developed new strategic themes, improving things for both our customers and employees

Our new approach to EDI is driven by new strategic themes which will see us:

- Play a leadership role in diversity and inclusion. We want to play our part in delivering sector change by being bold in the actions we take on EDI, sharing our work and using our influence to drive inclusive behaviours.
- Create a balanced workforce that's ready to help with our mission. We know that by having teams of mixed gender, ethnicity, physical ability, age, sexual orientation we will have a variety of viewpoints and a wider range of experience. This will in turn allow us to improve our decision-making and problem-solving.
- Become an organisation which embraces inclusion and belonging. Our employees, stakeholders and communities will see that we openly celebrate encourage everyone to be their authentic selves.
- Fully meet our customers' needs. We want to ensure that we continue to put our peoples' needs first. We know that their needs are varied and different. We will ensure that we meet those needs by considering the various ways in which our work impacts on them and allowing them to feedback to us. Doing so will also allow our customers to understand that we care and that we are here to help.
- We feel that our new approach is necessary as it will help us to achieve the best outcomes. The approaches we are taking set our vision for diversity and inclusion and will allow us to achieve our equality, diversity and inclusion ambitions.

What is equality, diversity and inclusion?



The terms equality, diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably but they are very different concepts.

Together they allow organisations to perform at their best, meet the needs of customers and stakeholders and enable employees to be the best versions of themselves.

Sovereign already has a strong set of corporate values. Those values support our vision, shape our culture and describe what makes us different. They guide the way we make decisions and work with our customers, colleagues and stakeholders.

Equality, diversity and inclusion is a golden thread that ties Sovereign together. It links corporate vision to our values and explains how we will achieve our actions with fairness, with respect and with collaboration.

We want equality, diversity and inclusion to become second nature at Sovereign so that we do not have to speak about their individual definitions and they become natural to the way in which we work.

We want equality, diversity and inclusion to become second nature to us all

A new framework for our EDI work

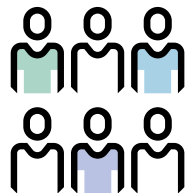
We've taken time to consider the framework we need to support our ambitions to become a EDI leader, a landlord and employer of choice and to create a workforce which is reflective of the communities in which we operate.

We've identified four new themes which we feel are fundamental to meeting our EDI priorities over the next three years.

Our strategic themes



Customer inclusion



Employee inclusion



Representation



Leadership

To help us deliver against each of these themes, we've developed an ambitious 3-year EDI action plan which will ensure that we're accountable and so that our progress can be measured.

Our four new themes will help us deliver our EDI action plan



Intersectionality

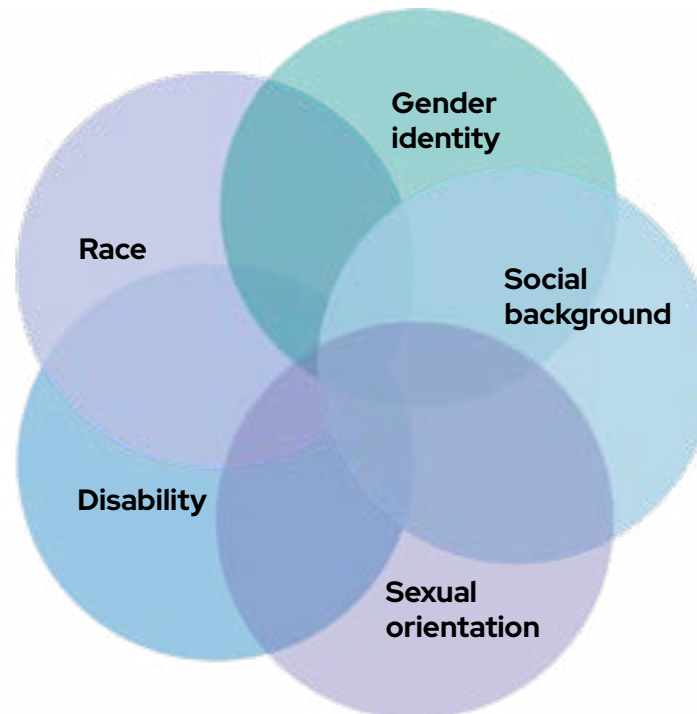
The ideology underpinning our EDI approach



We want to create a workplace and communities that allow people to be treated equitably and according to their needs. However, we also know that our individual identities aren't limited to one single experience. We're all made up of many different parts and we all have multiple identities. Within those multiple identities there's another story to tell for many people – i.e. multiple overlapping disadvantages.

We understand that people experience the world differently based on their overlapping identities. As we implement this strategy, we'll as an organisation consider advantage and disadvantage not through one "diversity" lens at a time but through a range of intersectional lenses so that we can better understand how advantage and disadvantage impact on individual people.

Taking this approach will allow us to take appropriate and equitable action to meet the needs of individuals within groups and prevent us from assuming that people belonging to a group or groups all have the same needs.



We understand that people often fall into more than one group

Our strategic themes



Customer inclusion



Employee inclusion



Representation



Leadership



Our strategic themes



Customer inclusion and engagement

Committed to improving the wellbeing and quality of life of our customers individually and collectively.





Our ambition

Everything we do has always been designed to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of our residents individually, and to contribute to developing thriving and resilient communities collaboratively.

Our customer base covers a range of people with different housing and community needs. With that wide range comes a need to understand our customers' needs so that we are able to achieve fair outcomes and build better neighbourhoods and sustainable communities.

The Covid-19 pandemic not only shone a light on inequalities in health and housing that exist in society and within communities but also had a disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and Minority ethnic people and also on disabled and elderly people.

All of this has emphasised again the importance of our listening, understanding and responding to residents' needs. It's very important that our customers understand we are fully aware of issues that affect them because we care.

Our customers and communities

We have, through our Thriving communities Strategy 2020-2024, already identified opportunities for targeted interventions to meet our community needs on important issues such as homelessness, younger and older residents, anti social behaviour and domestic abuse.

However, we have more community activities planned. We plan to maintain and build on these interventions by ensuring that our strategic approach for building sustainable communities works closely with our strategic approach and vision for diversity and inclusion.

We will work with customers who have struggled to manage living in their homes and provide them with the access to the support, development opportunities and training they need to thrive. As we implement our Homes and Place Standard and do even more to make sure we're building the right homes in the right places, we are even more determined to have EDI at the forefront of our thinking.

The actions we take here in our EDI Strategy and in our Thriving communities Strategy 2020-2024 will allow us to improve our services to our customers and to improve their lives whilst providing good quality, sustainable accessible and affordable homes.



What we'll do

Create customer experience groups to ensure that the services we provide are user friendly and inclusive of needs.

Analyse customer data regularly to help identify and adapt to the needs of our customers and reshape our services to accommodate those needs.

Provide training that enables our customer service teams to recognise and respond to the diverse needs of our customers.

Forge links with community programmes in the areas in which we operate, to help us understand local housing needs.

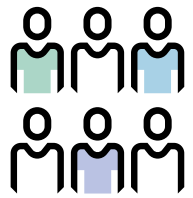
Promote employment opportunities at Sovereign to customers using relevant community communication channels.

Ensure that all residents fully understand how Sovereign defines and responds to hate crime.

Measure the Social Impact of our work.

Review our key service areas to identify and address potentially negative equality impacts on underrepresented groups.

Our strategic themes



Employee inclusion and engagement

Creating working environments to achieve equitable outcomes, celebrate difference and promote inclusion and belonging.





Our ambition

We aspire to bring out the best in people. To achieve this, it's important that our approach is inclusive. We know that colleagues who feel they belong are committed and less likely to leave the organisation. We also understand that perceptions of discrimination and of not belonging are stressors and barriers to trust.

Our ambition is for all employees to feel included. That will mean supporting, understanding and making adjustments where necessary to accommodate a broad range of needs. Clearly we want to encourage applications from a diverse pool of talent but we also want to be clear that the ability to work flexibly is very important to us. We think that every role at Sovereign should be able to provide flexibility, and we challenge our managers to accommodate a level of flexibility for everyone whilst putting our customers first.

We're committed to designing and developing roles that suit a wide range of our employees' working needs including working arrangements such as part-time working, job-sharing, flexitime, compressed and annualised hours, term-time-only working and mobile working.

Our employees

We want everyone at Sovereign to enjoy their experience with us. We'll provide opportunities for them to learn and grow and to let us know what their needs are. Collaboration will underpin our approach here. The actions we take will ensure that everyone has a voice, that their views on our approach as an organisation are heard and that everyone is treated with dignity, fairness and respect.



We want all our employees to feel that they belong

What we'll do

Provide our employees with the training and resources they need to support our drive for diversity excellence.

Integrate diversity training into our procurement and customer service.

Ensure that our support is tailored to people with conditions, such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD and dyspraxia.

Create employee resource groups for gender, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, disabled, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans employees and other support networks.

Promote employment opportunities at Sovereign to customers using relevant community communication channels.

Use the results of pulse and other employee surveys to measure and assess our employees' sense of belonging.

Review our flexible policy approach and promote flexible working opportunities.

Our strategic themes



Representation

Building a diverse workforce that is representative of the areas we operate in.





Our ambition

We're committed to using new and innovative approaches and to think differently to create solutions that do more. We believe that diversity drives innovation and creativity in all aspects and types of businesses. The more diverse we are as an organisation, the more creative we will be in understanding and finding solutions to meet our customer needs.

Our commitments and actions here are aimed at creating that diverse workforce and, importantly, one which reflects our customer base. We will take action to improve the profile and representation of all underrepresented groups at Sovereign but particularly people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and disabled people where we know that we have low representation rates.

We'll also reaffirm our commitment to strengthening our talent pipeline for women at all levels from continuing our commitment to increasing the number of women in our trades teams per annum to taking action to challenge barriers that may prevent women from progressing to our most senior positions.

A representative workforce serving our diverse communities

All of this means a commitment from us to set the right data driven targets for Sovereign to use to ensure we have a diverse talent pipeline and that we give ourselves the best opportunity to have the best people working with us at all levels at Sovereign.

Our ambition is to build a workplace that provides visibility of the career pathways available to those who'd like to progress and one that provides opportunity for progression for our people at all levels. In doing so, we'll seek to improve our employee experience and value proposition so that we can develop existing talent as well as continuing to attract the best people from all backgrounds to come and work with us.

To help us have a better range of diversity at all levels throughout Sovereign, we aim to review how we attract diverse talent and how we develop our people. We'll also set diversity targets to measure our progress and to reflect our ambition to become a more representative organisation.



What we'll do

Analyse our employee profile and put positive action plans in place to address areas of under representation including senior leadership.

Use data to help set aspirational targets on recruitment for underrepresented groups.

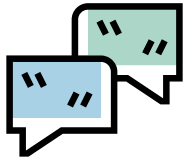
Review our recruitment data to understand trends and highlight any potential issues in recruiting diverse talent so that we can address them.

Assess our recruitment material and processes to ensure they help us attract candidates from diverse backgrounds, provide equality of outcome and are free from bias.

Implement positive action measures on Black, Asian and minority ethnic and disability recruitment.

Design a new career architecture which allows Sovereign careers to be tracked and which clearly articulates career trajectories from current grades into higher grades.

Our strategic themes



Leadership

Aiming to demonstrate leadership on EDI at work and to the housing sector.





Our ambition

Hand in hand with our ambition to be the leading landlord across the South of England comes a responsibility to show leadership in everything that we do, including our ambitions towards diversity and inclusion.

We also want to act a role model to the wider sector. We'll do this by providing clear commitments to the sector on our approach in this strategy from the outset and we'll continue to find and create opportunities to share our best practice as we move forward.



Walking the talk and showing the way

We'll start with our senior leaders and ask that they provide active leadership in embedding equality and diversity into every aspect of Sovereign.

We want our suppliers and wider stakeholders (potential and existing) to understand that diversity and inclusion is important to us. We aim to leverage our purchasing power to unlock opportunities and drive positive change with the aim of creating a more inclusive sector. We'll work with our suppliers to build stronger and substantial relationships through our shared values on diversity and inclusion.

Although EDI is now a conscious component of the internal leadership training that we provide, we feel it's important for colleagues at Sovereign at every level to demonstrate leadership and for our customers to understand how our leadership ambitions will benefit them. We'll start with our senior leaders and ask that they provide active leadership in embedding equality and diversity into every aspect of Sovereign.

What we'll do

Promote and embed equality and diversity into every aspect of business by providing effective training to all of our employees.

Provide our senior leaders with the training they need over the next 3 years to be able to model inclusive behaviours with confidence.

Ensure that all of our senior leaders have diversity objectives aimed at tackling unconscious bias and structural barriers to career progression within Sovereign.

Create opportunities to engage with people from different backgrounds.

Promote our approach to Diversity and Inclusion and Corporate Responsibility at the beginning of our contact with potential suppliers and take action to ensure our suppliers share our approach.

Delivery of our strategy

Our desire for leadership and excellence in EDI starts at the top



Monitoring our progress



Everyone is responsible and our board has overall accountability

Everyone at Sovereign has personal responsibility for EDI in our areas of work. However, our desire for leadership and excellence in EDI starts at the top.

Our Board has overall accountability for the delivery of our equality, diversity and inclusion strategy. In particular that means that our Board will monitor progress on this strategy and play its part in advancing our inclusion agenda over the next 3 years. We'll ensure that the Board receives regular progress reports throughout the year.

Delivery of our equality actions will be overseen by our EDI Forum (EDIF), a body established at Sovereign to monitor, enhance and challenge Sovereign's strategic commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion.

What we'll do

The EDIF will review the action plan for this strategy, update objectives and make sure that progress is being made.

The EDIF will also keep our people informed about EDI and what Sovereign is doing on a quarterly basis.

Our Board and Remuneration Committee will receive updates on equality and diversity from the EDIF including an annual report on progress during the next 3 years.

Spotlight on the EDI Forum

The EDI Forum exists to help Sovereign take an overview on EDI issues relating to employees, customers, residents, partners and contractors.

The Forum also oversees the delivery of the EDI strategy and action plan and makes sure Sovereign meets its legal and regulatory requirements by:

- helping promote equal opportunities
- ensuring the services we provide are fair and accessible to everyone
- helping to eliminate unlawful discrimination
- helping to create a more inclusive workforce

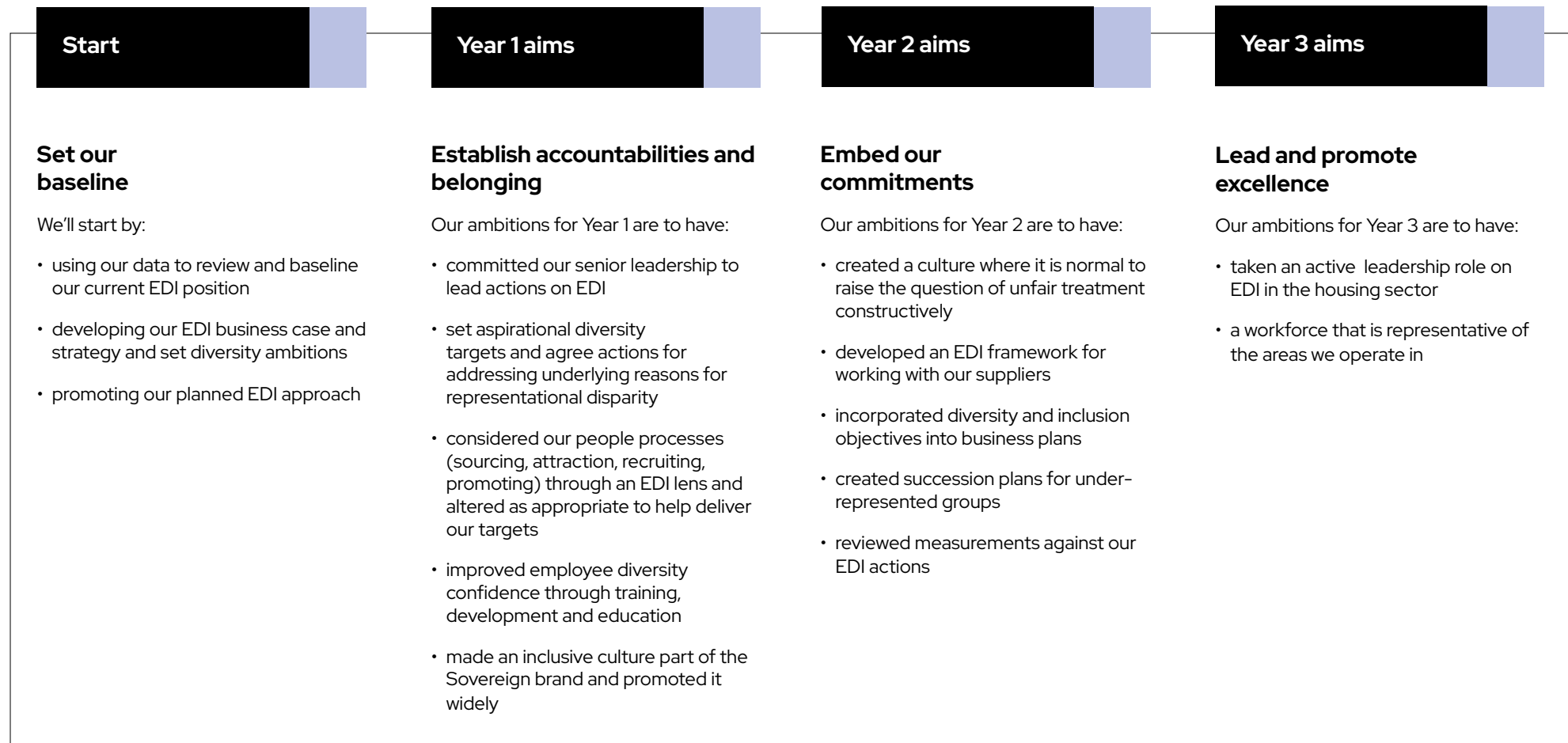
The Forum's has a minimum of eight members, made up of the following:

- a Board member
- the Chief People Officer
- the Equality and Diversity Manager
- a nominated representative from each directorate

As well as sharing good practice and keeping up-to-date with external best practice, the Forum has overall responsibility to review the action plan, update objectives and to make sure that we take action on EDI.

Establish, embed and lead

Our 3 year roadmap to success





Sovereign Housing Association Ltd

Sovereign House
Basing View
Basingstoke RG21 4FA

Phone: 0300 5000 926